1: Bowen-Jones et al. K-5 (1955-1958) 1961
EZ6 Malta EZ6

F. The Farmer in Maltese Rural Society

241 571 A study of the Maltese farmer within the total of agriculture in the Islands must include a consideration of the individual as a member of the community in which he lives, works and thinks.

The total social environment of the Maltese countryman may be seen as three concentric circles - family, village, and 'Malta'.

241 619 To the Gozitan who has never crossed the sea to Malta and to the old countryman for whom Valletta is a foreign world, the concept of 'Malta' is something large and indeterminate. But even for most of the rural population, for whom Valletta and the towns are becoming a familiar part of experience, the Islands are large enough for the countryman to feel none of the claustrophobia of which visitors to Malta complain. The 'National' unit is large enough for him to speak of *'Il-Gvern'* - the Government, of which he has heard frequently, though imprecisely, on all sides and on which he blames many of his economic and social problems with a characteristic disregard for logic or even fact. This concept of *Gvern* is of importance in an appreciation of rural thought in Malta. In it no very clear distinction is made between Maltese Government and the Imperial side of the Dyarchy. Neither is allegiance to one or other of the political parties very significant, for personality is always more important than party.

[178] To give an historical perspective to this attitude of the remoteness of *Gvern* one may see in it not only the product of foreign British rule since 1800 but also the legacy of the 'paternal' government of the Knights of St. John during their previous two and a half centuries in the Islands. Rural communities are characteristically conservative.

793 The other Malta-wide authority is that of the Church, but the summit of this is scarcely less remote to the individual than is *Gvern*. In the normal practice of his Religion the countryman leans directly on his local priests, though the Curia and Archbishop in Malta and the Bishop in Gozo do represent, for him, the essential unity that is the Maltese Church.

241 198 369 Within the framework of 'Malta' the distinction between the conurbation of towns, centred on Valletta, and the countryside is crucial. This 'conurbation' may be defined as those census districts with less than 3 per cent. of their working population engaged in farming. In 1948, this accounted for all districts bordering on either the Grand or Marsamxett Harbours together with the adjoining residential suburb of St. Julians (1). Outside this urban area, the farming element in the working population increases towards the west and north of Malta, although only in Mgarr does it pass 50 per cent. In Gozo, the scene is notably more 'rural', on the basis of this definition, with six of the 12 census districts having more than half their working population engaged in agriculture.

[463] A survey of parallel information in censuses over the past 100 years shows a declining farming element along with a diversification of the occupational structure - especially in those villages regarded as traditional strongholds of agriculture.

This trend to economic diversification has been accompanied by a break away from the former social homogeneity of these rural villages. In fact, economic and social change cannot be considered each in isolation. In Malta, change - in its widest sense - has spread into the countryside from the conurbation. The tempo of this process has accelerated rapidly since the 1939-45 war, which brought town and country together more than ever before and shook the foundations of the cleavage between 'peasant villager' and 'urban townsman', a key feature in the social geography of the Maltese Islands. The appearance of schools, amenities - particularly transport, and a degree of occupational choice, have enabled the countryman to sample a more 'urban' way of life and culture and this has produced a dissatisfaction with rural society as it has been. Maltese countrymen knew they were regarded, as a class, as low in the social scale of urban opinion. They accepted this fatalistically and were in fact able to view

2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1965
EZ6 Malta EZ6

Whatever the reasons for their beginnings in particular villages, there are today festa partiti or at least competing band clubs in nineteen villages and towns. Ten communities are divided by the type of rivalry described above. Of these Gudja has partiti which compete only over two secondary feasts and another, Żebbuġ, has three rival band clubs, two of which compete over the titular feast. Besides these ten, another four towns are divided by rivalry between their constituent parishes, five more are divided by rival band clubs not related to the cult of saints, although the band clubs in one of them, Żabbar, were once allied to festa partiti.

The competition between rival parishes of the same town is very similar to that between festa partiti. In fact the division of Qormi and Rabat (Gozo) into two parishes each came about partly because of the rivalry between festa partiti. Since each parish has its own church and is not limited by the 1935 regulations, the competition between them is even keener than between festa partiti within the same parish. For this reason the feasts of St. Mary and St. George in Rabat (Gozo) and St. George and St. Sebastian in Qormi are probably the most spectacular in the country. Competition between rival band clubs not related to the cult of saints, in contrast, is not as fierce as that between festa partiti. It is, nonetheless, a considerable force in the communities where it exists. Disputes between these band clubs usually involve questions of precedence, such as those which arise over their positions and role during the titular festa or at an installation ceremony of a new parish priest. Failure to reach agreement may mean that one or both boycott the celebration.

Finally, weak festa partiti once existed in another seven villages. But as they were not aligned with band or social clubs, they were not well enough organized to resist the firm pressure the Church began to exert after 1935. Today there is scarcely a trace of their former existence. All festa partiti and rival band clubs, both present and past, are listed in Appendix A.[1]

IV

Implicit throughout this examination of the various types of competing groups described in this chapter and in the previous one, has been the highly formal nature of their interaction. Their disputes are like war games. The action between them takes place

[1] [see p. 142, – Analyst]

2: Boissevain E-5 (1960-1961) 1965
EZ6 Malta EZ6

571 578 621 within a framework bounded by the decrees of the Church, the laws of the State and the appropriate body of custom. New pictures are not hung in churches and new procession routes are not followed unless permission has first been obtained from the Church. Action without this permission could result in the suppression of the feast, the desecration of the church or the interdiction of the ringleaders. In the same way, the threats and insults of demonstrating partisans rarely result in physical violence because of the swift penalties that the ever-vigilant police would impose. Permanent truce or peace between the partiti and competing parishes is impossible to achieve owing to the inherent nacure of the rivalry which exists between them. It is this state of continuous one-upmanship that provides the driving force behind much of the village politics in Malta. At least it did until the increasing involvement of the people in national politics created a new set of conflicting loyalties that cut deeply across many older ones.